

Thou Shalt Not Help Thy Kids

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One might think that if parents dug deep into their pockets to help their children the parents would be kissed on both cheeks, maybe even awarded a new Colin Powell civil society award. Not so if parents rush to assist a public school in New York City, Denver, Los Angeles, or most other jurisdictions. A new “scandal” recently erupted at PS 41 in Greenwich Village when parents volunteered to raise the funds needed to keep a teacher who was about to be axed due to budget cuts. The parents quickly collected \$46,000, enough to cover a year’s salary and benefits. The parents of a second school, PS 98 in Queens, were preparing to follow suit, and a similar drive was being launched at Steck elementary school in Denver. (In the District of Columbia such practices are rather common, including in the school my children attended, Lafayette.)

Far from appreciating the parents’ efforts, Dr. Rudy Crew, the chancellor of the New York City school system, ordered the fund-raising be stopped. To avoid a lawsuit by outraged parents, Crew provided the monies required to retain the teachers from his budget, diverting them from some other unspecified school programs. Other school officials explained that the issue was one of “basic equity,” that the city could not allow affluent communities to provide richer education for their children than less-endowed neighborhoods provide for theirs. An ACLU representative told a Los Angeles audience that if parents were allowed to help the public school in their neighborhood, then the pressure to increase taxes—which he said were needed for the whole school system—would falter. He added that if parents were adamant about making a donation, they should put their money into the city’s pocket, so that all school children could benefit.

Parents were quick to point out that the opposite holds true. Middle-class parents in major cities are making a tentative attempt to return their children to public schools as cities gentrify, and there is some limited movement back to cities from the suburbs. These parents are driven primarily by two concerns: public safety and good schooling. Now that crime rates are down, the quality of the schools has become an even more central concern. If parents are prohibited from

helping their schools, this could become a major reason for them to remain in, or return to, the suburbs. In this way, the moves by Crew and those like him, far from protecting tax revenue for the schools, would end up shrinking cities' tax bases.

From an accounting viewpoint, the whole debate is laughable. Many public schools are beneficiaries of major contributions from parents, corporations, and foundations. These gifts help pay for playgrounds, copy machines, computers, musical instruments, materials for art classes and labs, field trips, and much else. Nobody objected until teachers' salaries became involved. The difference, though, is rather technical. There is little difference between the parents paying for the library and the school drawing on the funds thus released to pay teachers—or the parents raising funds for the school to pay certain teachers.

True, one may well object to a parental group insisting that a peculiar ideology or subject be taught by funding a teacher they feel would impart it their way. Educational policy should be determined by the school in consultation with all parents. However, this is not at issue in any of the schools involved. In these cases, the parents rallied to provide funds for teachers already on the payroll, who teach subjects included in the curricula; furthermore, the teachers involved were those the schools sought to keep but could no longer afford.

Above all, simplistic notions of equity should not come between parents and their children. As communitarians have long pointed out, we are not merely citizens of the city or the state, but are also members of various families and communities. We correctly sense that we have particular obligations to those closest to us, above and beyond those we owe to others. This is most evident when it comes to our families. The Old Testament commands "honor thy father and thy mother," rather than limiting itself to the abstract "honor fathers and mothers." Nobody in his or her right mind would suggest that we have the same obligations to all children as our moral sense informs us we have to our own children. The same holds true for other members of our families, from aging parents to siblings. And while in some visionary future we shall all become brothers and sisters, a government that tries to ban communities from extending themselves for their own kind—either in the current social environment or in the best one a reasonable person

can anticipate—will undercut the volunteerism and charity that is distinctive of civil society and that makes America great.

Nobody is suggesting that we should prevent people who wish to make contributions to the whole city or country or even world from doing so; they surely deserve our respect. But if there is a new scandal in our public schools, it is the ban imposed by city bureaucrats on communities rallying to raise funds for teachers for *their* children in *their* schools.

"I speculated about the meaning of these concepts, 'rights' and 'responsibilities,' to the American people. I opined that we do not consider the two in tandem, not unlike the Constitution. We emphasize rights almost to the exclusion of responsibilities, be they designated individual, political, human, simple, natural rights. They're something we've got. 'I've got my rights': that is a declaration that transcends demography."

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